

Mary Abbe, *Fragments of human anatomy* featured in show at Weisman, Star Tribune, Minneapolis, MN, July 26, 1996.



"Primivada" by Jessica Crawford.

In the galleries

By Mary Abbe
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Pick one: You are what you eat. You are what you wear. You are what you do. You are what you believe. You are your body. If you went for the bod, you may be interested in the Weisman Art Museum's tightly focused, intelligent show "Through the Body," featuring recent photographic work by Minnesotans.

The show gathers the work of 11 mostly young artists who share contemporary culture's obsession with flesh and identity. Their typical subjects are not the beautiful bodies of fashion magazines and sports clubs, but fragments of the human anatomy — lips, limbs, feet, torsos and more private parts — which they visually manipulate to suggest complex psycho-sexual-political concepts of the self.

The body is hardly a new subject in art, and these artists are not breaking new ground by choosing it. Still, there is a certain 1990s look about this dark, fragmented, earnest work. Flashes of droll wit and visual poetry inflect the show, but it is fundamentally a somber exhibition whose unacknowledged subtext is mortality.

Curators Patricia Briggs and Diane Mullin interpret the work as part of an ongoing international dialogue about identity issues: the significance of physical attributes, gender and cultural history in shaping individuals. By focusing so exclusively on subject matter, they sometimes belabor the obvious and overlook important distinctions. Even so, they have spotlighted accomplished young Minnesotans doing provocative work.



A detail from "The Body in the Picture (Malka Michaelson)," by Dorit Cypis.

Fragments of human anatomy featured in show at Weisman

A huge wall construction by Shannon Kennedy dominates the first gallery. A postmodern self-portrait, it consists of 288 identical teal-blue images of the artist's face and hands, graduated in size. Arranged in a flat, diamond-shaped grid with the largest faces in the center, the images appear to project from the wall like a theater marquee. In a second work, she sews small pictures of folded forearms into long ribbons which dangle from the wall like undulating snakeskins.

Through hypnotic repetition, cropping and scale shifts, Kennedy distorts and alters body images until they are almost unrecognizable. Like the Andy Warhol icons it resembles, Kennedy's portrait emphasizes the inscrutability of the familiar. Her huge grid also contradicts the fundamental assumption of self-portraiture: the idea that the face is the window into the soul.

To sex or not to sex

Gender features and their implications recur in several artists' work. Stevie Rexroth eliminates them from her "Gender" photos, which concentrate on such non-sexed aspects of the body as legs, knees and rib cages. Elsewhere, she closes in on parts of the body

— elbows, forearms, the shadowy area between shoulder and breast — and prints her images through layers of plastic which give them a diffused, 19th-century look.

In a mural-sized installation, Lynn Lukkas goes even further in stripping away sexual associations, depicting the human body as a robotic manikin. The installation consists of a large, five-part photographic collage of a reclining, vaguely female nude whose body openings have been electronically erased. Close-up images of the orifices appear in color on tiny video monitors below the black-and-white mural.

The video images walk a weird line along which kinkiness becomes Puritanism. By stripping the body of its openings, Lukkas creates an invulnerable, impenetrable, asexual and ultimately inhuman being. The disconcerting creature appears to be both an ideal safe-body model for the plague-ridden '90s and a jest about the long Euro-American tradition of depicting women as sex objects.

The light-filled, poetic photos of Michael and Abigail Braley Mouw, a husband-and-wife team, suggest the changeability of flesh by combining X-rays of birds with icons of beauty — a rose, a butterfly, a fan, a woman's leg.

Photographing herself while

sciously echo classics. Alas, the curators rarely acknowledge these connections to photography's history and esthetics and consequently mistake artistic dialogues as critiques of contemporary culture.

A tower-shaped sculpture by collaborators Mark Barlow and Keith Braafladt, for instance, is likened to an oil-rig symbolizing "an industry dominated by men, money, and power." The photo of Braafladt spitting water atop the tower alludes to a much-reproduced water-spitting self-portrait by Bruce Nauman, who was, in turn, alluding to Duchamps' famous 1917 urinal sculpture called "Fountain."

The curators likewise ignore the 19th-century origins of Barlow and Braafladt's most elaborate work, an installation called "Field/Feeled," consisting of 60 photos of their own comically grimacing faces. Misreading them as novel depictions of culturally conditioned body language, they overlook the artists' parody of earlier efforts to photograph human emotions, especially the now-campy photos by Oscar G. Rejlander and others that Charles Darwin published in his 1872 book "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals."

Curators Briggs and Mullin distort these photographs by treating them primarily as voices in the ongoing debate about whether biology is destiny. Fortunately, the work is too rich and sophisticated to be confined by such a limited reading.